The Distribution of Early Manuscripts: New Testament Transmission, Church Growth, and Textual Preservation

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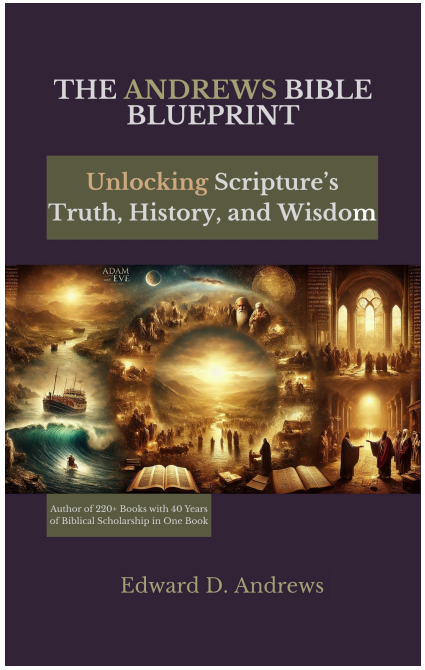
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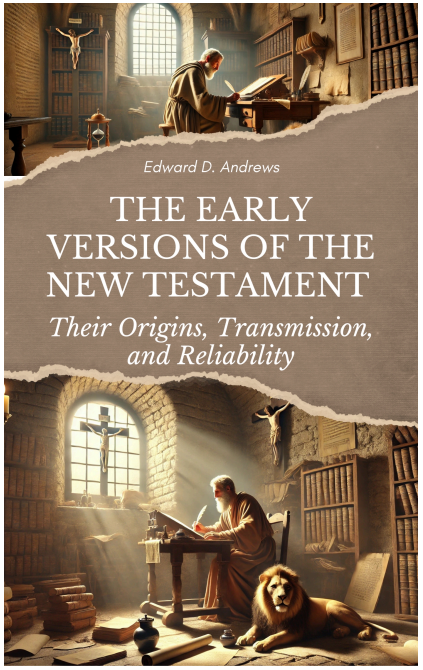
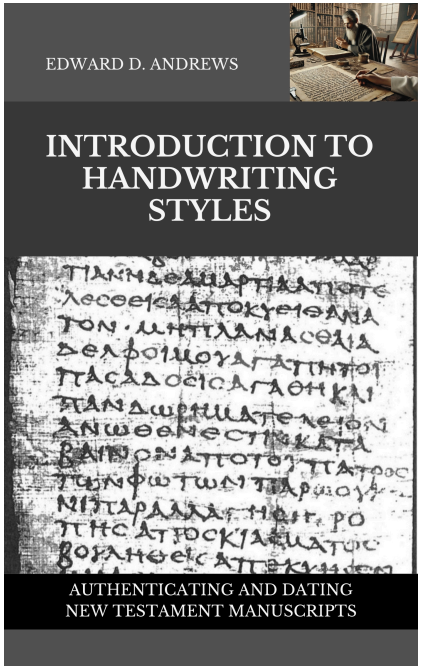
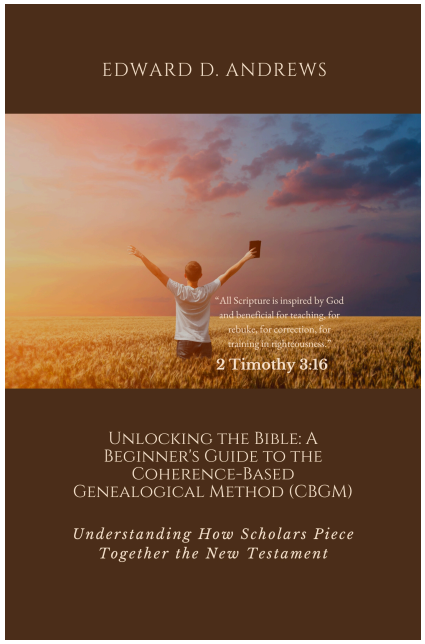




Manual Transmission in the Ancient World

Unlike the mechanized publication of books in modern times, the distribution of New Testament writings in the first centuries C.E. was entirely dependent on manual labor. Each copy of a book was made individually by hand, usually by a literate Christian reproducing an exemplar (referred to in ancient terminology as an *antigraph*). Occasionally, popular works—such as Homer's *Iliad* or *Odyssey*—were "mass-produced" in scriptoria where a single reader dictated the text aloud to several scribes simultaneously. This type of production would eventually influence later Christian monastic communities in the Byzantine period, but during the first three centuries, Christian texts were mostly copied *per manus*, one by one, either by literate individuals in churches or by semi-professionals with basic documentary skills.

Manuscript production and circulation in the earliest churches was not uniform or centralized. Yet, despite the lack of institutional infrastructure, the distribution of New Testament writings spread with notable efficiency throughout the Roman Empire. Churches needed copies of apostolic writings for use in teaching, worship, and polemics. While these early Christians did not enjoy the privileges of mass communication, they preserved and propagated the Word of God through personal initiative and ecclesial dedication.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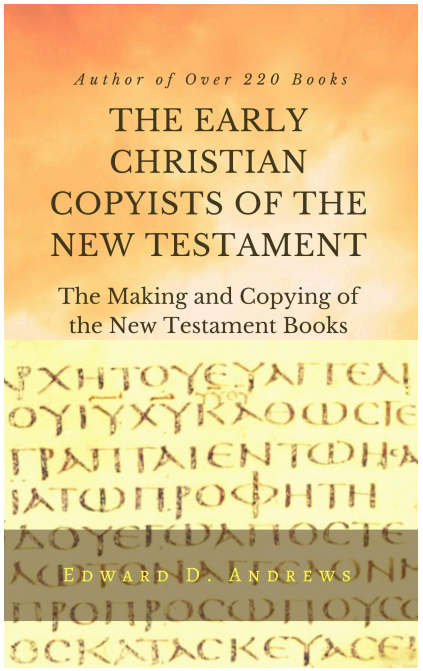
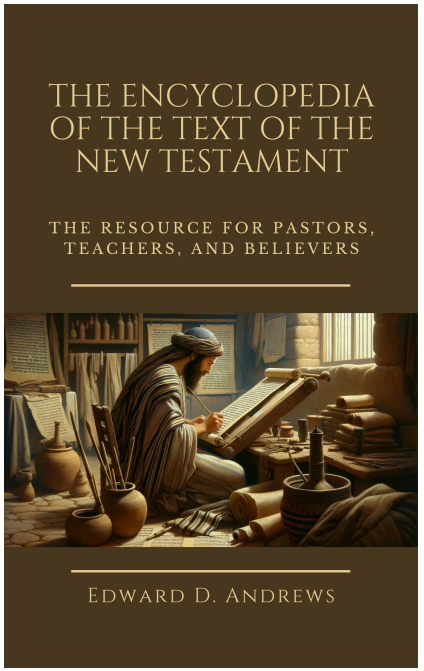
"All Scripture is inspired by God and beneficial for teaching, for rebuke, for correction, for training in righteousness."
2 Timothy 3:16
UNLOCKING THE BIBLE: A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO THE COHERENCE-BASED GENEALOGICAL METHOD (CBGM)
Understanding How Scholars Piece Together the New Testament


Author of Over 220 Books
THE EARLY CHRISTIAN COPYISTS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT
The Making and Copying of the New Testament Books
EDWARD D. ANDREWS

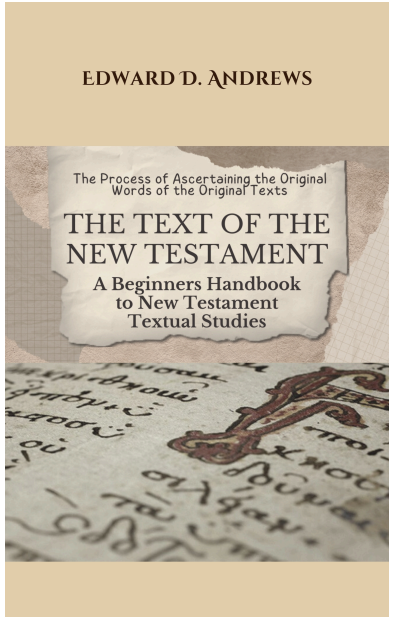


How the Manuscripts Traveled

Contrary to assumptions that the Roman postal system facilitated rapid transmission, Christian writings typically traveled via hand-delivery. The *cursus publicus*—Rome's state-run postal system—was neither public nor reliable for private use, especially for Christian documents. Government mail prioritized imperial business, and use of the system often came with heavy taxation.

Instead, manuscripts were carried by trusted individuals: friends, coworkers, or traveling believers. The New Testament itself documents this pattern. Paul's letters were delivered by men such as Tychicus (Colossians 4:7), Timothy (1 Thessalonians 3:2), and Epaphroditus (Philippians 2:25).

Revelation was sent to the seven churches of Asia via seven *angeloi*, not celestial beings but literal messengers (Revelation 1:20). Thus, hand-delivery ensured that manuscripts, while vulnerable, remained secure and trustworthy within the Christian network.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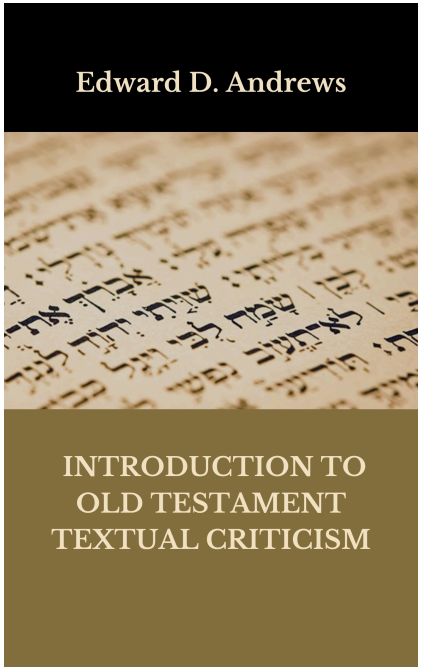
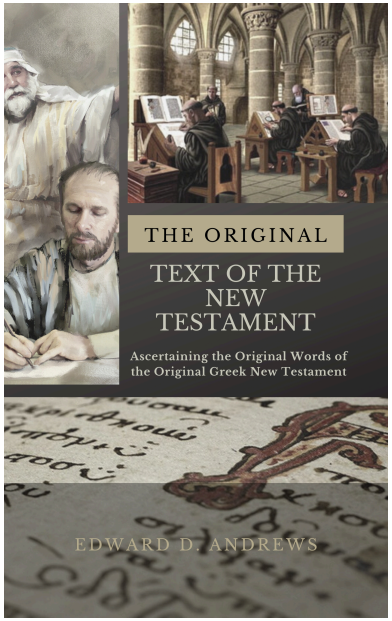
The Process of Ascertaining the Original Words of the Original Texts
THE TEXT OF THE NEW TESTAMENT
A Beginners Handbook to New Testament Textual Studies




THE ORIGINAL
TEXT OF THE NEW TESTAMENT
Ascertaining the Original Words of the Original Greek New Testament
EDWARD D. ANDREWS

Church Growth and Its Implications for Manuscript Multiplication

The growth of the Christian movement in the first two centuries directly influenced the distribution of New Testament writings. Beginning in Jerusalem with 120 disciples (Acts 1:15), the church rapidly expanded, seeing thousands added in short order (Acts 2:41; 4:4; 5:14). By the mid-first

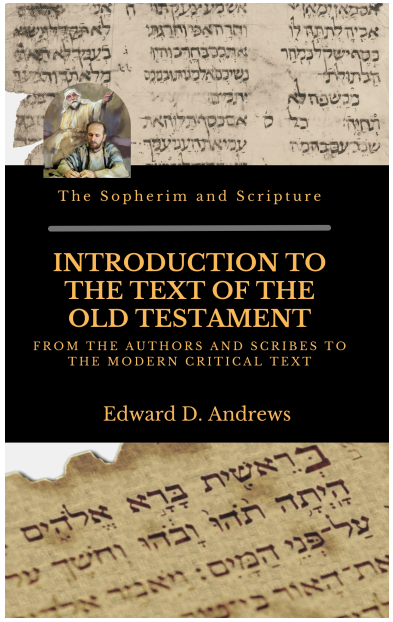
century, Christianity had spread throughout Judea, Galilee, Samaria, Syria, and parts of the Greco-Roman world.

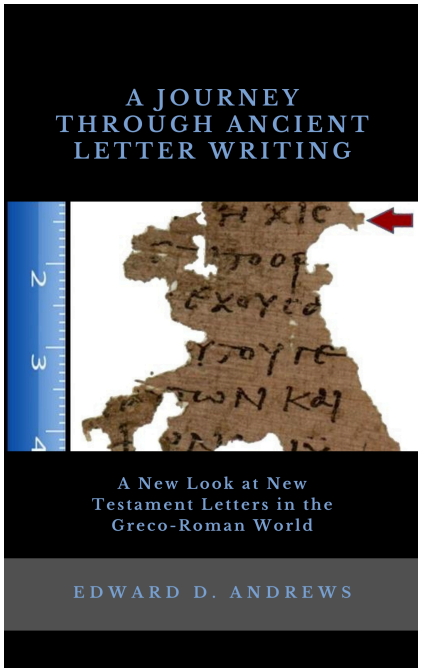
Each local church required written Scripture. As Paul's epistles circulated (see Colossians 4:16), it became customary for churches to make local copies. By 56–57 C.E., at least five house churches existed in Rome (Romans 16:5–15). By the time of Nero's persecution (64–68 C.E.), Tacitus records that an "immense multitude" of Christians were executed. This rapid expansion ensured that demand for apostolic letters and Gospel accounts outpaced the speed of single-copy reproduction.

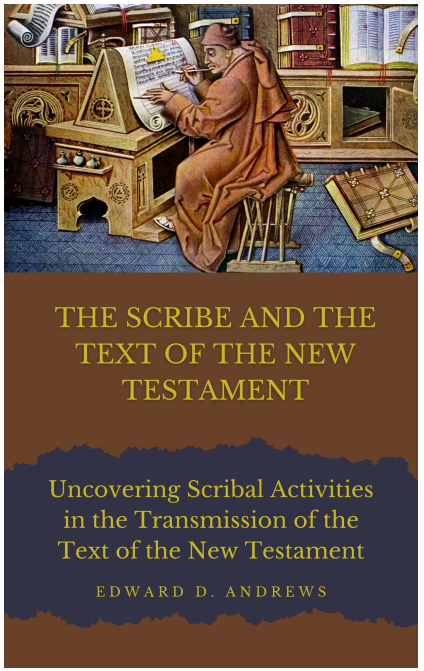
Alexandria, with its substantial Jewish population, served as another major center. The case of Apollos in Acts 18:24 implies that Christianity reached Alexandria early, possibly through diaspora Jews converted at Pentecost (Acts 2:10). Ephesus became a hub for Gospel and epistolary copying, particularly through the ministry of Paul and Timothy (see 1 Timothy 1:3–5; Colossians 4:16).

Antioch in Syria also played a critical role. From Antioch, Christian missionaries were first sent (Acts 13:1–3), and the term “Christian” was first coined (Acts 11:26). By the early second century, governors such as Pliny the Younger were dealing with widespread Christian presence, even in regions Paul never visited (e.g., Bithynia).

As Christianity spread, so did the New Testament writings. These were not mass-distributed through commercial bookstores, but preserved, copied, and passed on by faithful believers one manuscript at a time.


The Sopherim and Scripture
INTRODUCTION TO THE TEXT OF THE OLD TESTAMENT
FROM THE AUTHORS AND SCRIBES TO THE MODERN CRITICAL TEXT
Edward D. Andrews




THE SCRIBE AND THE TEXT OF THE NEW TESTAMENT
Uncovering Scribal Activities in the Transmission of the Text of the New Testament
EDWARD D. ANDREWS

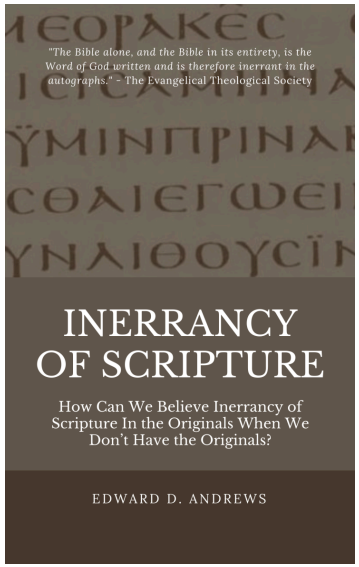
Estimating the Early Manuscript Numbers

If we assume that churches replaced their codices every 20–25 years due to wear and liturgical usage, a basic extrapolation becomes possible. Starting from an estimated 100 churches by 200 C.E., and a 25-year lifespan for codices, we arrive at the following conservative estimate:

By 100 C.E.: approximately 200 church copies of Paul's letters and the Gospels
By 200 C.E.: an additional 250–300 church copies
By 300 C.E.: over 1,000 codices of Paul's epistles and over 1,000 Gospel codices

These figures reflect only public, ecclesial use. Private ownership and reproduction would have multiplied this number significantly. Literate Christians, particularly wealthier individuals, sometimes commissioned personal copies or sponsored copies for others. Church fathers such as Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen encouraged private reading, indicating that a substantial segment of believers engaged with Scripture personally outside of congregational worship.

Origen, for instance, spoke frequently of individual Christians reading the Scriptures at home (*Homilies on Genesis* 2.8), and Clement encouraged family reading of Scripture (*Paedagogus* 2.10.96; 3.12.87). Pamphilus, a Christian scholar and presbyter in Caesarea, organized a library of biblical texts copied for distribution to the needy, a fact confirmed by Jerome (*Against Rufinus* 1.9).


"The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs." ~ The Evangelical Theological Society
INERRANCY OF SCRIPTURE
How Can We Believe Inerrancy of Scripture In the Originals When We Don't Have the Originals?
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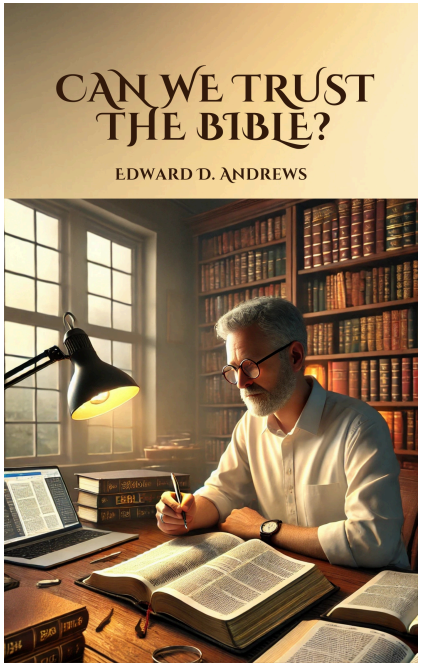

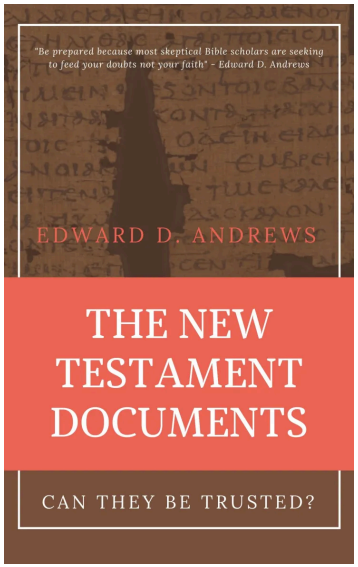
"Be prepared because most skeptical Bible scholars are seeking to feed your doubts not your faith" ~ Edward D. Andrews
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THE NEW TESTAMENT DOCUMENTS
CAN THEY BE TRUSTED?

The Diocletian Persecution and the Attempted Eradication of Scripture

This flourishing distribution of New Testament writings made Christian literature a prime target during the Diocletian persecution beginning in 303 C.E. For the first time in Roman history, not only were Christians imprisoned and executed, but their sacred writings were deliberately sought out and destroyed. The edict at Nicomedia (February 23, 303) called for the demolition of churches and the burning of Christian books. Diocletian sought to enforce imperial unity through traditional Roman religion—and the eradication of Christianity's scriptural foundation was central to that effort.

Diocletian (Reigned 284–305 C.E.)

Eusebius, who lived through these events, recounts, “the sacred Scriptures of inspiration [were] committed to the flames in the midst of the markets” (*Ecclesiastical History* 8.2.1). W. H. C. Frend affirms the thoroughness of the Roman campaign, stating, “All over the empire the authorities set about burning down Christian churches and collecting copies of Scriptures.”

Some Christians complied and handed over their Scriptures, while others courageously resisted. Bishop Felix of Thibiuca, for instance, chose martyrdom rather than surrendering his texts. Others handed over noncanonical works or hid their manuscripts in homes and caves. In Coptos, Egypt, a Christian hid Philo’s treatises—stuffed with Gospel fragments—in a wall niche. In Cirta, manuscripts were distributed among local lectors to avoid confiscation. Such anecdotes testify to the reverence with which believers guarded the Word of God.

Despite the persecution, many manuscripts survived. The Beatty and Bodmer papyri collections, dating from the second and third centuries, testify to the resilience of Christian communities and their Scriptures. These included entire or near-entire codices, preserved from the flames. The greatest cache of biblical papyri—those from **Oxyrhynchus**—provides unparalleled insight into manuscript proliferation.

THE DATING, REDATING, AND REDATING AGAIN OF P52
THE P52 PROJECT
IS P52 REALLY THE EARLIEST GREEK NEW TESTAMENT MANUSCRIPT?
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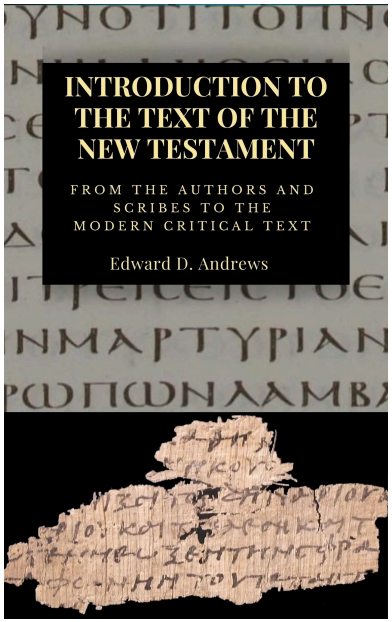
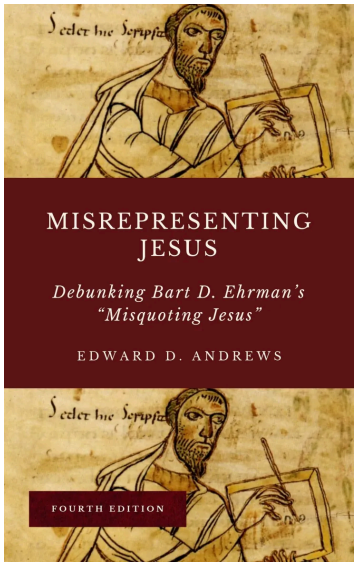




Oxyrhynchus: A Testament to Broad Distribution

Oxyrhynchus, an ancient city in Egypt, has yielded 46 papyri containing portions of the New Testament, most dating between 200 and 400 C.E., with several extending into the second century (e.g., P52, P90, P77, P103, P104). These papyri reflect a mixture of public and private use. Some were clearly formatted for church reading (large letters, formal bookhand), while others reflect informal, personal use.

Garbage Heaps in Oxyrhynchus, Egypt

Examples of manuscripts likely used in worship settings include P1, P5, P15+P16, P23, P30, P39, P48, P77+P103, P90, P95, P104, P108, and P109. Conversely, personal-use manuscripts include P9, P17, P18, P24, P106, and P107. The mixed quality of scribal work and varying formats suggests widespread access to Scripture—beyond elite clergy or monastic scribes. Churches and individuals were involved in the copying, reading, and preservation of the New Testament.

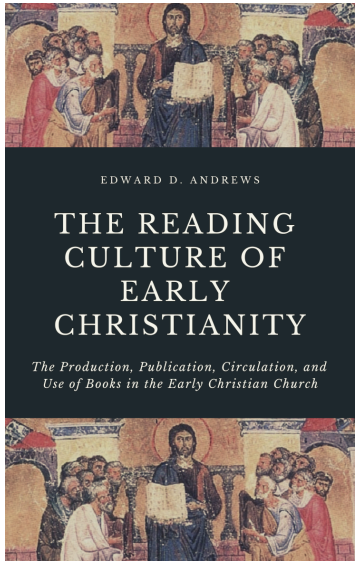
Excavations at Oxyrhynchus about 1903

The Post-Diocletian Revival and Expansion

Following Constantine's Edict of Milan (313 C.E.), Christian Scripture was no longer contraband but state-protected. Constantine commissioned Eusebius to prepare **fifty complete Bible codices** for the churches of Constantinople (*Life of Constantine* 4.36). This was an unprecedented moment in church history: Scripture was now produced with imperial endorsement.

By 400 C.E., the number of dioceses had reached approximately 400. Based on J. Duplacy's estimate, between 1,500 and 2,000 Greek New Testament manuscripts were produced in the fourth century—about 4–5 per diocese. This would represent a substantial leap in manuscript availability and standardization.

In the early fifth century, Theodoret of Cyrus removed 200 copies of Tatian's *Diatessaron* from his region and replaced them with separate Gospel codices—demonstrating that fourfold Gospel manuscripts were widely available, even in relatively remote areas.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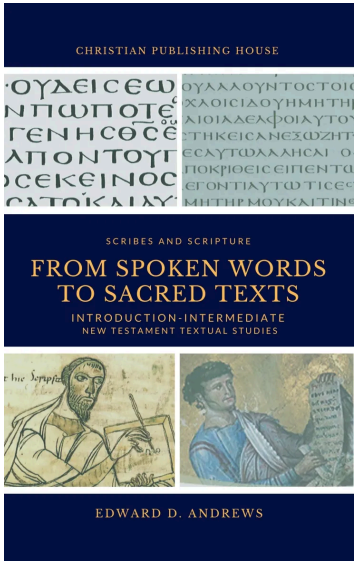
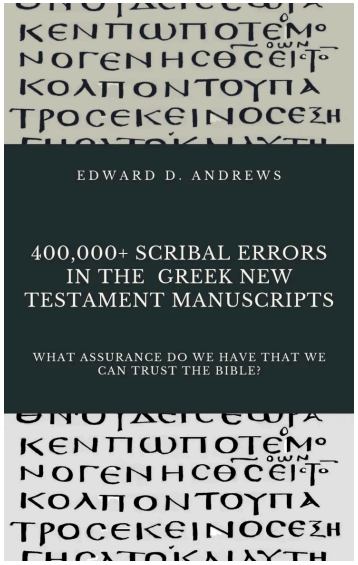
THE READING CULTURE OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY
The Production, Publication, Circulation, and Use of Books in the Early Christian Church

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400,000+ SCRIBAL ERRORS IN THE GREEK NEW TESTAMENT MANUSCRIPTS
WHAT ASSURANCE DO WE HAVE THAT WE CAN TRUST THE BIBLE?

Conclusion: Preservation Through Proliferation

By the end of the fourth century, the Christian Scriptures had achieved unprecedented distribution across the Roman world. Despite early obscurity, persecution, and material limitations, the New Testament was copied, circulated, and cherished by a rapidly growing church. Hand-to-hand and heart-to-heart, faithful believers ensured that the words of Christ and His apostles would not perish. From the obscure cities of Asia Minor to the elite circles of Constantinople, from private readers in Oxyrhynchus to public lectors in Antioch, the preservation of the New Testament was the fruit of ordinary Christians laboring under extraordinary conviction.